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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the use of teasing as a teaching technique in a first-year college-level Russian class at a major university in California. The instructor is a native Russian speaker, and the class consisted of nine undergraduate students. A review of literature on teasing reveals its dual nature for conveying both a literal message of insult and a "metamessage" of playfulness. It was found that in this classroom context, teasing was used as a strategy for error correction, but only for pragmatic errors, not grammar or pronunciation. Six segments in which the teacher teases one or more students in order to make a pragmatic point are examined, and a structure is identified in the sequences: a problem (an utterance whose pragmatic form or message content is problematic); corrective teacher feedback; the target response to the feedback; audience response; and follow-up. It is concluded that, as playful enactments of serious activities, the teasing sequences described here offer an ideal space for language socialization. Through participation in them, students are engaged in naturalistic interactions in the target language that require them to attend not only to grammatical form, but also to the social and affective dimensions of language. (Contains 17 references.) (MSE)

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Introduction

This study looks at teasing in a foreign language classroom. Before we can begin, we must define the term "teasing". The literature on teasing (Drew, 1987; Pawluk, 1989; Alberts, 1992; Norrick, 1993; Norrick, 1994; Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997) characterizes it as a form of interaction that operates on two levels. First, there is a literal message. This literal message is often hostile or aggressive, such as an insult, a threat, a criticism, or a display of anger. But along with this literal message, there is also a metamessage. This metamessage says "This is play. Don't take it seriously." Taking a notion from Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974), we can define teasing as a potentially face-threatening act enacted in a playful key.

This dual nature of teasing makes it a powerful medium for conveying a serious message in a less face-threatening manner. For example, studies of adult-child interactions (Ochs, & Schieffelin, 1984; Clancy, 1986; Eisenberg, 1986; Miller, 1986; Ochs, 1986; Schieffelin, 1986; Ochs, 1988) have found teasing to be a means of censuring and correcting a child's actions and thus socializing children into culturally appropriate behavior.

The teacher-initiated teasing that I observed in this Russian foreign language classroom serves a similar purpose. Teasing in this class is used as a strategy for error correction. Students are evaluated for two types of errors; first, errors in linguistic form, and second, errors in pragmatic appropriateness, including violations of social expectations and norms. Teasing is not used to correct grammar or pronunciation errors. It is, however, the primary strategy for evaluation and correction of pragmatic errors.

The class in which these data were collected was a first year Russian foreign language class at a major university in California. The instructor is a native speaker of Russian who holds the position of lecturer in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the university. She

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was born and educated in Moscow and came to the United States about 20 years ago. The class consisted of nine undergraduate students.

The Sequence

In the following sequence, the students learn a lesson about the relative status of interlocutors and how this status is reflected in the language. This sequence has several parts.

As the sequence begins, the class has just finished reading a dialogue from their textbook.

Segment 1

38	**Teacher**	((*looks down at her book*))
39		**Mm-hm. Xoroso.**
		Good
		Mm-hm. Good.
40	**Adam**	**Alla? Alla?**
41	**Teacher**	((*looks up at Adam*))
42	**Adam**	**V eti frazy**
		in these phrases
		In these phrases
43	**Teacher**	((*looks at Adam with an expression of annoyance*))
44	**Adam**	((*points to book with his pen*))
45	**Teacher**	**Alla Ivanovna.**

In line 39, the teacher responds to the students' recitation of the dialogue with "Mm-hm, good." Then one of the students, Adam, has a question about a phrase in the dialogue. The teacher is looking down at her book, so in order to get her attention Adam calls out her first name, "Alla, Alla" (line 40). The teacher looks up at him, and this act is interpreted by Adam as permission to take the floor and ask his question. He begins "In these phrases" (line 42), but the teacher interrupts him in mid-sentence and instead of answering his question provides another form of her name: Alla Ivanovna.

In order to understand what is happening here, you need to know something about terms of address in Russian. In Russia addressing your teacher or other higher-ranking person by a first name only is considered disrespectful. The correct form of address for such persons is their first name and their patronymic. A patronymic is a kind of middle name that is derived from the person's

father's name plus a masculine or feminine suffix. In this case, the teacher's father's name is "Ivan," so her patronymic is "Ivanovna". So in line 45, the teacher is correcting Adam. He is not to address her as "Alla" but as "Alla Ivanovna".

By her tone and facial expression, the teacher appears to be annoyed at Adam's disrespectful address to her. The students respond in various ways to their teacher's apparent displeasure.

Segment 2

4[illegible]	**[illegible]ulia**	((*smiles at teacher*))
4[illegible]	**[illegible]h**	((*smiles at Adam*))
4[illegible]		**(.5)**
4[illegible]	**[illegible]am**	**Ah izvinite.**
		excuse me
		Ah excuse me.
50	**Teacher**	((*gives a quick nod*))

In line 49, Adam apologizes, and the teacher, in turn, acknowledges his apology with a quick nod of her head (line 50). However, note the reaction of two other students to this exchange (lines 46, 47). While both Adam and the teacher appear to be quite serious, these two students are smiling. Then, something interesting happens.

Segment 3

51	**Sara**	**DA:: hahaha**
		yes
		Ye::s hahaha
52		((*throws back her head, covers her mouth*))
53	**Students**	((*laugh*))
54	**Teacher**	((*smiles slightly at Adam*))
55	**Adam**	((*smiles, then laughs*))
56	**Teacher**	((*smiles broadly*))

Another student, Sara, bursts into laughter (line 51). Through her laughter, Sara publicly displays her interpretation of the interaction as non-serious. This display triggers reciprocal laughter from the other students (line 53), and finally, the two primary participants, Adam and the teacher, smile (lines 55, 56). We now have a class consensus that the teacher's rebuke of Adam is not to be taken seriously. She is "only teasing."

So, Adam's utterance in line 40 initiates two shifts. First, there is a shift in focus away from the original activity (the dialogue) and onto Adam's utterance itself, which is judged to be

problematic. The utterance itself then becomes the object of discussion. Second, there is a shift in key from serious to playful. This playful key continues through line 56.

At this point, Adam attempts to shift the focus back to the original activity and to return to his as yet unanswered question.

Segment 4

57	**Adam**	**Umm cto takoe=**
		what this
		Umm what does=
58	**Teacher**	((*looks at Sara, makes a face*))
59	**Adam**	**=o vasej zizni?**
		about your life
		'about your life' mean?
60	**Frank**	((*to Sara*)) **We've caught that on video**
61	**Teacher**	((*looks at Adam*))
62	**Sara**	(*to Frank*)) **Da: that was hilarious.**

Adam succeeds in asking the question (line 57, 59), but is unable to restablish the serious key as the other participants continue to operate within the play frame. In line 58, the teacher playfully makes a face at Sara in response to Sara's outburst. Meanwhile, Sara and another student, Frank exchange comments about the humor of the episode, especially the fact that the incident was captured by the researcher's video camera (lines 60, 62).

The teacher then moves towards the blackboard, positioning herself to close the teasing sequence and answer Adam's question. She begins to restate the question to the class but then interrupts herself and instead follows up on the tease.

Segment 5

66	**Teacher**	**U nas segodnja ser'eznyj urok.**
		of us today serious lesson
		We have a serious lesson today.
67	**Nina**	**haha**
68	**Teacher**	**Menja zovut Alla Ivanovna.**
		Me call(3PL+PRES)
		My name is Alla Ivanovna.
69	**Sara**	((*to Frank*))
		That's why we have to call her Alla Ivanovna.
70	**Adam**	**Alla Ivanovna**
71	**Sally?**	**Alla Ivanovna**

This follow-up has both playful and serious elements, both of which are reflected in the responses of the students. The humor arises from the contrast between the statement 'we have a serious lesson today' (line 66) and the decidedly non-serious nature of what has just occurred. It can thus be seen as playful, and is so interpreted by one student, Nina, who laughs (line 67). However, at the same time the statement makes reference to the circumstances under which such a term of address is to be used; in 'serious,' that is, formal, situations. Sara's comment to Frank, "That's why we have to call her Alla Ivanovna" (line 69), addresses this element of the follow up, as does the response of Adam and another student in lines 70 and 71, who practice saying the teacher's name and patronymic, just as they would do with any new Russian word.

Finally, the teacher closes the teasing sequence by turning toward to blackboard and beginning to erase it in preparation for the next phase of the lesson, but the discussion about culturally appropriate terms of address continues.

Segment 6

79	**Adam**	**Professora Ivanovna.**
		Professor(FEM)
		Professoress Ivanovna.
80	**Sara**	((*to Frank*)) **=so it's**
81	**Teacher**	((*puts eraser down, looks at Adam*))
82	**Sara**	((*to Frank*)) **=Alla Ivanovna**
83	**Teacher**	**Net Alla Ivanovna.**
		no
		No, Alla Ivanovna.
84		((*waves hand at Adam*))
85	**Adam**	**Oh.**

In line 79, Adam offers another candidate as a term of address for the teacher. Adam's candidate, linking a feminized form of the Russian word *professor* 'professor' with the teacher's patronymic, is problematic on two counts: there is no such word in Russian as *professora*, and titles such as 'professor' are used with last names, not with patronymics. The teacher therefore rejects Adam's candidate and reaffirms the appropriate term (line 83) and Adam acknowledges her feedback (line 85).

Elements of a Teasing Sequence

As illustrated in the foregoing example, teasing sequences in these data follow a clear structure. They begin with a **problem**, an utterance whose pragmatic form or message content is deemed problematic. In this case the problem was Adam's use of an inappropriate term of address to his teacher. The teacher then marks the previous turn as problematic and, in this case, provides corrective **feedback**. What is interesting about this feedback is the form that it takes. In this instance, the teacher does not merely correct Adam or explain to him why he should not address her as "Alla". Instead, she reacts to his utterance just as a "real" Russian teacher might, with annoyance.

Next comes the **target response** as the target of the tease responds to the feedback. Adam's response, an apology rather than simply a correction of his previous utterance, indicates that he understands the affective force of the teacher's correction and that his error is one that requires an apology.

But these teasing sequences are not limited to a dialogue between the teacher and the target of the tease. There is always an **audience response** as other students participate in the tease. Sometimes this participation is through laughter, as was the case here, but in other cases the other students join in the teasing with comments of their own.

Teasing sequences also contain a **follow-up** as the teaser continues or otherwise expands the tease, as the teacher did here with her comments about it being a "serious lesson today". Finally, the teasing sequence is closed as the teacher shifts back to her teacher role and returns to the original activity.

Conclusion

As playful enactments of serious activities, the teasing sequences described in this study offer an ideal space for language socialization. Through participation in teasing sequences students

are engaged in naturalistic interactions in the target language that require them to attend not only to grammatical form, but to the social and affective dimensions of language as well. At the same time, the performance of these interactions within a controlled setting enhances students' opportunities for participation and minimizes the face-threatening potential.

In a teasing sequence the teacher and students enact mock performances of real world interactions. The teacher's interactional role shifts to that of a "teaser," who reacts to students' problematic utterances with an affective display that mimics a real world reaction to such a pragmatic *faux pas* and challenges the students to think quickly to interpret linguistic and paralinguistic cues and give an appropriate response. For example, to respond to the teacher's utterance in line 45 ("Alla Ivanovna") Adam must first understand that he has made an error, then determine that his error is a pragmatic one that demands an apology, and finally recognize that the teacher's rebuke is meant playfully. Only then can he respond appropriately with an apology--and a smile.

Students are guided through these complex interactions as the teacher structures the teasing sequences in accordance with the students' abilities. First, the teacher identifies a problematic utterance and models an appropriate reaction to the problem through an exaggerated affective display. Subtle cues of intonation and prosody used in these reactions are accompanied by more overt and accessible signs, such as facial expressions and body positioning, that assist students in interpreting the act. With eye gaze and gesture she then invites students to share her reaction. The students participate in the tease at various levels, ranging from silent observation to active participation.

In addition, because these activities are performed in a playful key, they do not have the same consequences as they would otherwise. In the real world, Adam's addressing a superior by her first name would cause offense. In this playful setting, however, it generates only a mock display of offense that dissipates once the teasing sequence has closed. The message is conveyed,

but without serious consequences. To use Bateson's (1972) terms, within this setting students receive the 'nip' rather than the 'bite' that their actions would provoke in the real world.

Participation in teasing sequences thus offers students an opportunity to practice interactions that stretch their linguistic and pragmatic abilities (Vygotsky, 1978). In this sense, teasing sequences can serve as a pedagogical strategy for moving students through the zone of proximal development to higher levels of cultural competence.

Abbreviations

1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
ACC	accusative case
F	formal second person pronoun
FEM	feminine
IF	informal second person pronoun
INF	infinitive
IMP	imperative mood
MASC	masculine
PL	plural
PRES	present tense
PST	past tense
SNG	singular

Transcription symbols
(based on Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974: 731-33)

[	Overlap
ø	Low volume
CAPITALS	Increased volume
-	Cut off
Underlining	Emphasis
Colon:	Lengthening
Period.	Falling intonation contour
Question Mark?	Rising intonation contour
Comma,	Falling-rising intonation contour
(( ))	Comments
(.2)	Pause (in seconds)
(?)	Problematic hearing
↑	High pitch
hhh	Exhalation
(h)	Breathiness within a word

Note: All original utterances (in Russian or in English) are **boldfaced**. English glosses of the Russian are in *italics*.

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